

Washing or erasing marks on old bills can do more harm than good

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—Years ago my father saved three \$5 gold certificate bills he got in change. All of them date to the early 1900s, but two are quite soiled and the third is covered with pencil marks. Would you advise washing the bills or using a soft eraser on them?—L.T., Elk Grove Village.

A—Absolutely not, because you'd likely do more harm than good. Washing old bills usually causes some fading of the design while erasing creates rough areas or whiter-than-normal blotches in the paper.

Collectors prefer to own keepsakes without such telltale signs of "doctoring." No amount of washing or erasing will repair the wear suffered by your gold certificates.

Q—I've been told that the federal government sells several types of inexpensive medals to collectors. Is that true, and if so, how do we order them?—A.C., Mt. Prospect.

A—Yes. As part of an ongoing program, Uncle Sam produces at least 250 different medals, all in bronze and some as large as 3 inches in diameter.

Among subjects depicted are the presidents, military heroes, great events in American history and famous buildings. Prices vary, depending on size and type, with the largest medals costing \$8.30, postpaid.

For more information on official government medals, write to the Bureau of the Mint, 55 Mint St., San Francisco, Calif. 94175.

Q—Is it too late to order the government's gold medallions honoring Willa Cather and Mark Twain?—S.J., Chicago.

A—The ordering period ended July 4. But don't despair; sometime this fall, the 1982 medals depicting musician Louis Armstrong and architect Frank Lloyd Wright will go on sale. I'll report details when they are announced.

Q—Here's a question that has members of our school coin club stumped. Why do some of our coins—the dime and quarter, for examples—have grooves around the edges while the penny and nickel have smooth edges?—T.D., Chicago.

A—Starting in the late 1700s, Uncle Sam placed grooved [or "reeded"] edges on silver and gold coins and smooth edges on coins made with copper and other cheap metals. The grooves discouraged people from shaving off bits of precious metal and then attempting to spend the coin for its full face value.

In modern-day America the grooves serve no practical purpose since the government no longer uses silver or gold in circulating coinage; they are simply a relic of the good old days.

Want to know the value of your old coins or currency? Send your questions to Roger Boye, Arts & Books, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want a personal reply.